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A.NOLEN

Assaulting Mt. Helicon: Writing and Current Affairs.

monthly archives: SEPTEMBER 2012

SPOILED ROTTEN

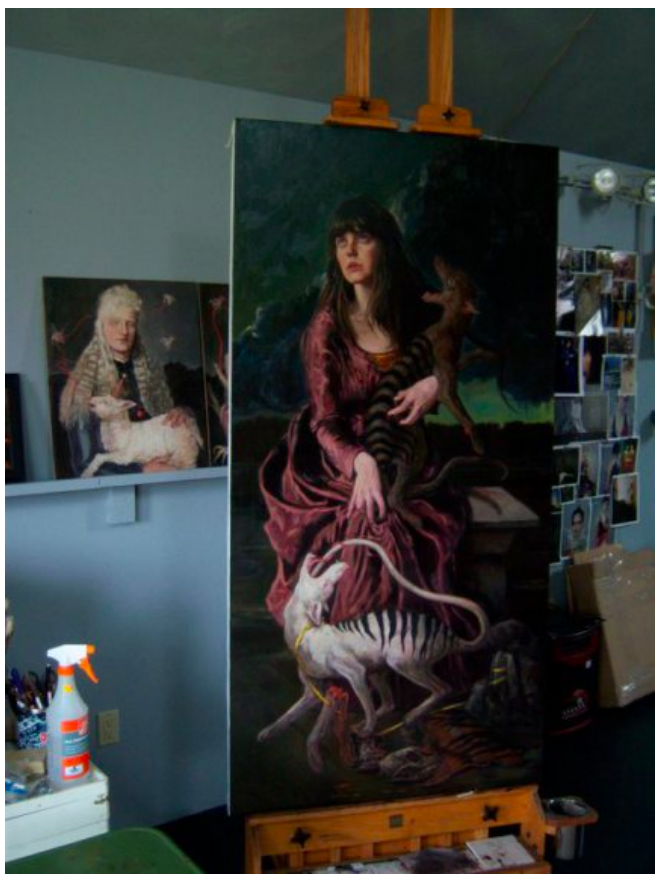
The Raft of the Medusa, 2012. Gail Potocki. The artist makes her own frames.

I had the best weekend ever. I'm going to practise self-discipline and blog about one thing at a time.

Husband and I went down to Chicago last night to Gail Potocki's first solo-exhibition.

If you like old-school technical mastery and symbolism, then Gail's work is for you. There are people doing this type of art on the East Coast, but I've never found anybody as good as Gail or the group of artists surrounding The School for Representational Art in Chicago. (All this time they were in my own back yard!)

I'm just going to dive in with this one, because it's my favorite. It's also the first one by Gail that I ever saw. (In the Ann Nathan Gallery, Chicago.)



Following the Straight Line of a Circle

I wish I had a shot that does it justice, but hopefully you can see the home-run she's hit here. Most of her work has environmentalist themes.

Her portraits are awesome too. Have a look at this one, then read about Jim Rose and have a look at it again. Freaky- but tell me she hasn't captured him *exactly*.

Ever heard of Joe Coleman? He's famous for his one-hair-brush paintings of serial killers. He's turned his freezer into an arctic battle panorama using toy soldiers. That's just the inside of the fridge. On the outside, he's taped Polaroids of everybody who's visited his preserved Victorian fetus, " Junior". (They know who they are, but for the rest of us, think A-list like Johny Depp.) I can't say I find that cool, but it explains why in Gail's portrait of Joe he is dissecting his own heart.

To see that particular painting of Coleman, buy Thomas Negovan's book *The Union of Hope and Sadness*. (Tom told me the above stories; hear him talk about The Vienna Secession here.)

In the meantime, Steampunk personified. *I bet he gets that all the time.*

Joe Coleman, painter.

Arianna Huffington's assistant used to be a model for Gail; she's in the painting below, which was on display last night. (I wonder if the new job is as fun?)

Synthetic Sea, 2011.

Read Huff Po's take on Gail's work, then read everything Huff Po left out.

Metallica also commissioned a painting by Gail: Through the Never.

Sadly for me, Tom Negovan's gallery Century Guild is relocating to Los Angles and Gail's exhibit is their last. Gail will continue to live and work in the Chicago area.

Check out the School of Representational Art here; the post-WWII history of representational art here.

Next week: Stickley comes to Madison!

LEAVE A COMMENT

ENVY

Envy, by Juri Olesha 1927.

> *I am enjoying my life, ta-ra! ta-ra! My intestines are functioning very well, ra-takta-ta-ra-ree! My gastric juices are behaving very nicely, ra-ta-ta-doo-ta-ta! Contract, O my bowels, contract! Tram-ba-ba-boom!*

Meet Andrey Petrovich Babichev: manager of the Food Trust, attendant of the Supreme Council of Soviet Economy, martyr for the Revolution. He's a celebrity; expansive and charming in everything- a real aristocrat.

In his public life he has two goals. 1) Produce the perfect sausage. 2) Serve said sausage at the perfect restaurant, where every meal costs "One Quarter of a Ruble". Babichev does nothing in half measures and when his perfect sausage is completed, he and his friend Shapiro from the warehouse will exhibit it in Milan.

> *"Your Babichev is a genius- a genius," he said, "At last he has constructed the perfect sausage. He has attained perfection. You know, at thirty-five kopecks, no one has ever had such a good value for their money."*

The sausage is in fact quite ordinary.

In his private life, Babichev's goals are equally large. He keeps a harem of young people in his apartment from whom he can suck whatever gratification he needs at any time. This isn't a book about sex- there's nothing explicit in the novel. What Babichev keeps them for is a constant supply of adoration; sex is incidental. And no flattery is too ridiculous for the jealous, greedy Babichev:

> *"In everything I do I imitate you. I even make a noise when I am eating, like you do."*

Envy is a psychological study of why one of these young people hangs around Babichev, when he really wants to leave the bloated cuss. In fact, all of Andrey's catches- at some level- want to leave him. Olesha follows the same structure as Dostoyevsky with *Crime and Punishment*.

How does Andrey pull this off? A mixture of carrot and poison. He promises fame, love but then is judiciously cruel and inconstant: enough to make the young people doubt themselves. Could I do it without Andrey? Is life empty without him? (His harem consists of a writer, a footballer and his own niece.) He picks his targets carefully, they are all strivers with 'low self-esteem', to use a modern term. Does the writer ever get away, I wonder?

The book is remarkable in another respect: it gives a picture of what Soviet life was like that is rarely discussed in the West. They had many of the same social programs that UKUSA has now, for instance:

> *Oh in the government offices,*
>
> *People are beginning to cheer*
>
> *When Liza Kaplan*
>
> *Becomes an engineer…*

That all didn't end well for them.

Patronage was a big thing too- favored people weren't rich with

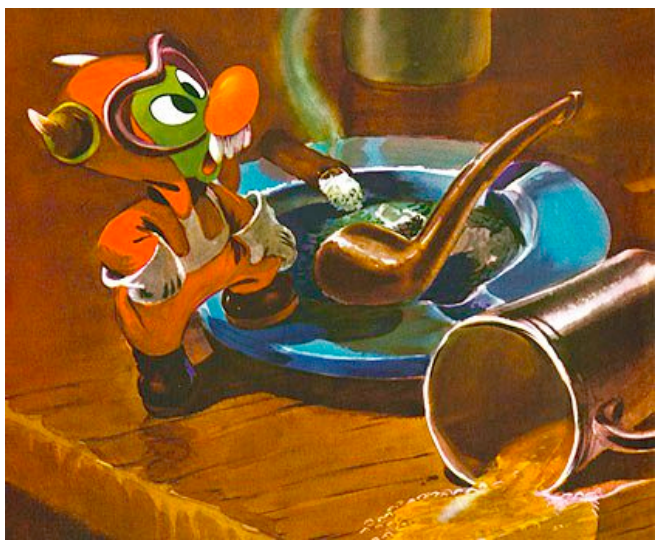
money (usually!) but they were given key positions in distributing goods or services. Warehouse manager, for instance, was a highly sought-after position, because you got to decide who got what. Another perk: you could score selling stuff on the black market. This attitude persisted after the fall of the USSR; Russia's got a bad rep for it.

Envy is one of the few books that mentions the famine that occurred after the Bolsheviks took power. Had it not been for American aid, the new government would have failed.

I recommend buying the Robert Payne translation from Green Integer Books. This is a short book with a lot of punch. It was also the end of Olesha's career, according to the New York Review of Books. One guess why.

LEAVE A COMMENT

ALIENS



One part Dahl, one part Disney, one part RAF.

I was 11 years old when the X-Files first aired. I don't think I saw it until I was about 13 though, because that's when it hit the BBC. University students with grungy hair and Doc-Martins wore "I want to believe" tee-shirts.

It's 1995 and I want to believe in something… so, aliens! God was passé (maybe even anti-social); ghosts and vampires weren't cool yet; fairies were fruity; so yeah, why not aliens?

Fast-forward twenty years. I would never, NEVER in my wildest dreams have imagined that when I was thirty, aliens would still be fixture-programming. Especially on *The History Channel*, *Discovery Channel*, etc. (Aren't those supposed to be educational, non-fiction channels?)

I remember that Tony Soprano called *The History Channel* "The Hitler Channel"; but Hearst & Disney seem to have toned that down a bit. Aliens are still okay.

For the blessed few who have never seen one of these alien programs, this is a typical rundown: There has been a US government coverup of alien contact. US Military and assorted academic experts give their theories on why something saucer-shaped could fly; the psychological profiling of extraterrestrials; weather phenomenon. After about two hours and eight commercial breaks I've already forgotten what the original cover-up was, but specific details have been picked to shreds by 'credible' experts. (Usually, each factoid is repeated twice.) I'm left pretty sure that there must have been aliens at Roswell.

Why do programs like this exist?

My answer:

1) If people are worried about aliens then they're not worried about something important.

2) In the public's mind, people who talk about 'cover-ups' become synonymous with people who 'want to believe'.

There's a lot of real history that A&E should be covering- stuff that's true, entertaining and that needs to be aired. But that's not what A&E are doing.

The last time Disney collaborated with the military they gave us *The Gremlins*; now the little green guys come from slightly higher up.

LEAVE A COMMENT

THE GREY

The Grey, 2011.

Dogs are scared of wolf's pee; they start to whine and lower their heads when they smell it. Why are they scared? Because dogs know that they're up against something more serious than they are. They know they're children pitted against an adult.

That's domestication for you: preselecting for cub-like behavior. *The Grey* is a movie about what it means to be an adult. There is no whining in this movie.

1hr 17 min of suspense; I don't think I've ever seen a movie this well done before. I sat through the entire ending credits stunned. Apparently there is another scene after the credits, but Netflix threw me back to the selection page before anything like that came up. The ending is perfect as is; I'm not sure how a post-credits surprise could improve it.

The Grey is based on a book (titled 'Ghost Walker') by Ian MacKenzie Jeffers, who collaborated with director Joe Carnahan on writing the script.

Variety has an interesting article on marketing:

> *Open Road said it used several cross-promotional strategies to market the pic [*The Grey*] to Christian and various ethnic groups. Distrib also partnered with the Weather Channel to promote "Grey," focusing on the pic's hazardous filming conditions in Alaska. "The Grey" marks only the second release for the distrib, after last year's "Killer Elite," which grossed $25 million domestically.*

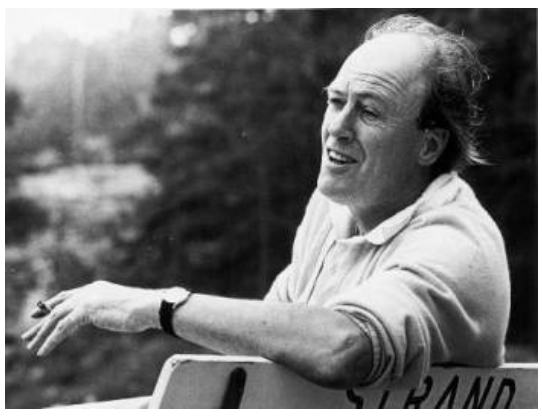
This made me wonder, because the film isn't terribly Christian- I'd say it celebrates the natural order more than the afterlife. The film is also unflattering to gangsta-culture and machismo; so it's unclear to me which ethnic groups the marketers were courting.

Those groups aside, marketing through *The Weather Channel* was a masterstroke. The people I know who watch *The Weather Channel* are guys who have to get up early and get something done that day. They're in a good position to appreciate *The Grey*.

Irrespective of who watched it, the film made money: $50 million in profit. I will add 5/5 a.nolen-stars on top of that.

LEAVE A COMMENT

GRAMMATISATOR



And smoking, none the less.

Found another favorite Roald Dahl story yesterday and it's a zinger. *The Great Automatic Grammatisator*.

I'd embed a link, but I haven't found a good one online. Every site that mentions this particular story- and I mean every- seems to have missed the point.

An awkward genius called Adolph Knipe (*not* Alfred Knopf) invents a machine that writes short stories at the touch of a button. There's a button that tailors stories for *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Reader's Digest, Ladies' Home Journal, Colliers*– every big American magazine that will pay money for fiction. The point being that their material is trite and predictable.

Knipe pays famous authors to stop writing and pastes their names (and sometimes his) at the top of the Grammatisator tales.

> *… he [Knipe] went in his big car to seek his next client. This one was female, famous and popular, whose fat romantic books sold by the million across the country. She received Knipe graciously, gave him tea and listened attentively to his story.*
>
> *"It all sounds very fascinating," she said. "But of course I find it a little hard to believe."*

> *"Madam," Knipe answered, "Come with me and seeit with your own eyes. My car awaits you."*
>
> *So off they went, in due course, the astonished lady was ushered into the machine house where the wonder was kept. Eagerly, Knipe explained its workings, and after a while he even permitted her to sit in the driver's seat and practice with the buttons.*
>
> *"All right," he said suddenly, "You want to do a book now?"*
>
> *"Oh yes!" she cried. "Please!"*

Knipe corners the fiction market; he focuses on mediocrity because that sells. Authors are only too happy to comply- they sign Knipe's contract and let the machine write their stories for them.

> *And worse is yet to come. Today, as the secret spreads, many more are hurrying to tie up with Mr. Knipe. And all the time the screw turns tighter for those who hesitate to sign their names.*
>
> *This very moment, as I sit here listening to the howling of my nine starving children in the other room, I can feel my own hand creeping closer and closer to that golden contract that lies over on the other side of the desk.*
>
> *Give us strength, oh Lord, to let our children starve.*

Alfred Knopf published some of Dahl's books; I've heard that the business relationship ended badly. Knopf was a publisher that was always in the right place at the right time in the years just after WWII; picking up politically-correct authors out of the wreckage of Europe. They also published *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* in the 1970s.

So is Dahl just a cranky old man? (He's been called worse names than that.) Surely, if his vision of Knopf is not true, then the market for short stories is thriving?

My bud, Stephen King, editor of *The Best American Short Stories* 2007:

> *The American short story is alive and well.*
>
> *Do you like the sound of that? Me too. I only wish it were actually true.*

And…

> *In 2006 I read scores of stories that felt… not quite dead on the page, I won't go that far, but* airless*, somehow, and self-referring. These stories felt show-offy rather than entertaining, self important rather than interesting, guarded and self-conscious rather than gloriously open, and- worst of all- written for editors and teaches rather than readers.*

Sounds like the machine needs some, er, calibration.

The Great Automatic Grammatisator is a catalog of tricks that keep the reader entertained. I'm sure that months ago, when I started to really think about these things, I would have missed half of Dahl's tricks here. They're gloriously human:

> *1.Start the story in mid-conversation between the two protagonists. It's sort of like eavesdropping.*
>
> *2. Knipe isn't interested in praise from his boss or the press. Why?*
>
> *3. Neither man likes each other; both pretend to.*
>
> *4. Graphic descriptions of mouths- yes* mouths*– the part of the face that is expressive yet overlooked in writing, and a little creepy.*

The Great Automatic Grammatisator– classic Dahl.

LEAVE A COMMENT

THAT DAMN
MIDDLE CLASS

Fashionable Britain.

I grew up in the U.K.

Brits like to *insincerely* bemoan the fact that they have a class-conscious society, unlike the United States where everybody is fat.

There are three classes in Britain: lower, middle and the aristocracy. It is an insult to belong to only one of these classes. You guessed it: the middle.

"That's so middle class."

"Those middle class…"

"The hypocritical middle class…"

"Middle Class" anything is disdainful to aspiring Aristos and many real blue-bloods. This disdain is a self-hating attitude for most people and a fear-filled attitude for the rest. (BTW, Truman Capote, that climbing little bunny, had the same contemptuous world-view. Look what happened to him, Jo.)

So, I wasn't surprised AT ALL to read J.K. Rowling (now blond) professing the faith:

> *"We're a phenomenally snobby society," Rowling nods, "and it's such a rich seam. The middle class is so funny, it's the class I know best, and it's the class where you find the most pretension, so that's what makes the middle classes so funny." The book is so funny I was halfway through before noticing that every character is, to a varying degree, monstrous.* – From an interview about Rowling's new book.

I'll lay my cards out on the table. The only thing good about Britain is its middle class. The lower class are slowly-starving yobs; the upper class does its best to imitate the lower. (Sheltered from the consequences of trashy behavior by their money, of course.)

I've lived in many different countries, in most of which 99.9% of the people live in hovels, while the remainder gorge themselves on booze, drugs and Prada. It's the middle class that makes Britain and other developed countries work. That distasteful middle class, always trying to better itself, always judging according to their standards, never paying enough taxes…

Ms. Rowling is trying to buy her way into the confidence of fashionable people by reaffirming their prejudices and fears. After all, she used to be part of the middle class, so she should know, shouldn't she?

Read her wiki biography and decide for yourself. She certainly chose the right Mitford Sister.

One more thing, while I'm here.

> *The book is so funny I was halfway through before noticing that every character is, to a varying degree, monstrous.*

That sort of writing is easy, and indicative of immaturity, because there's no love in it. If the quote is an accurate description of Rowling's grown-up-book, then it shows her to be a rather spoiled, rather odious person. Great writers criticize; great writers can get angry; but they would never be satisfied with a book full of monsters because it shows the limits of their understanding.

Am I surprised that Rowling has created monsters only? No. Look at the Death Eaters in *Harry Potter*. Does Rowling ever explore why the Death Eaters believe what they do; why they are willing to die for their cause? No, they are just evil. They are sick, soulless, the enemy, the other… I'm sure that Jess Mitford would sympathize.

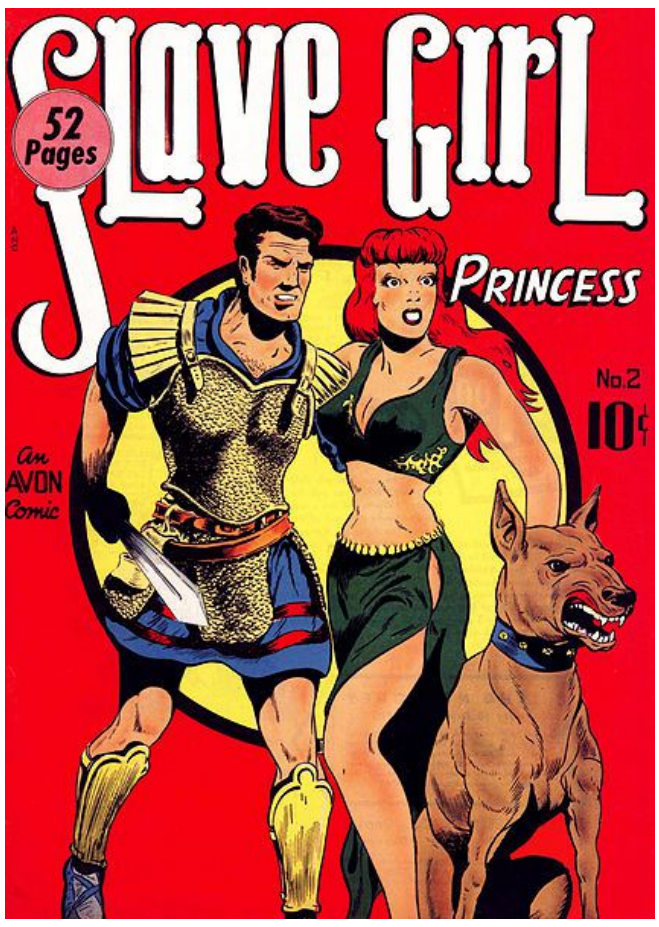
Rowling is a propagandist, whether she's conscious of it or not. For people like her "they hate our freedoms" or "axis of evil" are explanation enough. She's an old woman now, and still writing flat books with with no real love.

You can read my take on her Potter books here. (BTW, my kids

won't be reading them.)

LEAVE A COMMENT

SLAVE GIRL



You won't be laughing by the end of the post.

I'm trying to be a smart author. I'm trying to find a market for my work, and I'm trying to tailor my work to readers' tastes.

It's a disheartening process, because popular literature has been in a race to the bottom for the past forty years (at least). Romance and Science Fiction are the two genres that book-buyers are still interested in.

Romance titles have the largest share of the consumer market, so I'm going to focus on those.

Sex sells books. It's hard to get away from this when you're researching the pop lit market. It wasn't always that way. Well, maybe it was, but publishers had a code of honor: 1) they didn't have explicit sex in the story 2) the heroine was a virgin 3) the heroine was sweet and innocent 4) if she worked, it was in a traditionally female industry.

That was back in the day when the pulp romance novel was dominated by Mills and Boone (a British publisher). Things started to change when the Americans got on board. Summoning George Orwell once again:

> *…it was interesting to see how promptly "anti-Fascism" was adapted to pornographic purposes by the editors of the Yank Mags.*

The excerpt is from Orwell's essay *Boys' Weeklies*, read more here.

For the popular romance, things started to go downhill in 1972, with Avon's publication of Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower*, which was the first mass-market romance to feature explicit sex scenes: Mom's reading material got dirty. (Avon had published anti-Nazi material and comic books in the 1940s; Avon was formed from J.S. Ogilvie Publications, a 'Yank Mag' concern.) *The Flame and the Flower* sold well, so more followed.

Another fine J.S. Ogilvie Product.

A 2002 writer's perspective on that period:

> *In the 1970s, the Gothic novel, featuring a helpless, frightened heroine and a somewhat dangerous hero, was the rage.*

Julie Quinn puts it slightly differently:

> *"The heroines were doormats, with all these alpha males bossing them around. I can't imagine a romance novel published today where the hero rapes the heroine and she falls in love with him."*

I bet that you already know where I'm going with this. 40-million-copies-bestseller-everywhere *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

> *This erotica bestseller began as a work of* Twilight *fan fiction called* Master of the Universe*, earning a massive fan fiction following years before the book deal. Most traces of this fan fiction history have been removed from the Internet.- The Lost History of Fifty Shades of Grey*

Back in 2002 this is how one romance writer saw the industry:

> *Nowadays, women have male friends, work beside men and have more equal relationships with men. As a result, novels now focus more on achieving healthy, balanced relationships, Kern says.*

Fast-forward ten years. *Fifty Shades* and *Twilight* don't feel very balanced to me. Just like antique pulp fiction, they're all about a virginal 16-22 year old dating a much older man who has vastly more power in the relationship. The relationship is 'dangerous' for the woman/girl- which is a euphemism for exploitative. *Slave Girl*!

So, circa 2012, educated, empowered women choose to read about *Slave Girl*. *Slave Gir*l is the fantasy they run off to, after they've put in their 9-5 and toned at pole-dancing class. I guess that 'a relationship between equals' didn't sell. Even with the doors flung wide open for sex.

Even more disturbing, *Twilight* is described in the trade as 'young adult' fiction aimed at adolescents.

> *..the worst books are often the most important, because they are usually the ones that are read earliest in life.* – Boys' Weeklies

Did we start going north and end up going south? Is the making-women-like-men stuff really just a back door for porn? If you choose to be exploited is it not exploitation? Sort of like strip clubs and illegal labor aren't exploitation? Is this the UKUSA *zeitgeist*– people choosing to be exploited?

LEAVE A COMMENT

A NUMBERS GAME

When I was very young I liked She-Ra and Princess Leia. It's true.

Up until a little while ago, if somebody asked me "How long is a book?" I would have put on a smug smile and asked "How long is a piece of string?"

If they persisted, I would probably give in and say what I really think. 350 pages.

If they asked me how many words are on a page: 300.

WRONG!

From reading around- not a scientific sample- I've learned that industry standard is 250 words a page. For fiction, anyway. It might be a little more for serious books without a lot of dialogue "white space".

I guess word count doesn't really matter for books anyway- only freelance journalists and short-story writers get paid by the word. Page count is the one that matters for book-authors.

Page count. How many pages can Simon and Schuster risk on me? How much a.nolen can they convince a Borders shopper to buy? How much do they want to pay the editor?

Page count depends on the genre! (Further and further down the rabbit hole…) According to Coleen Lindsay, an ex-book-agent at Penguin, the shortest-page-count-genre is "category romance" which clocks in at 55k-75k words per page; the longest is "science fiction and fantasy," which can go up to 120k if it's "epic/high/traditional/historical fantasy".

So, how do they get to these numbers? The figures are probably market/profit driven. I can work with that: time for a little supply-chain-management.

If you're not going sell a lot of units, they've each got to be expensive. (Think of those $75 books.) If you're selling tons, they can be cheap. Interestingly, romance and sci-fi are the only genres that are really growing. Pub houses are scaling back everything else.

So the two categories with *growing* sales are at both extremes of the page-count spectrum.

Category romances are what used to be called "bodice rippers". Now, I guess that term is offensive.

Bodice-rippers are sold *where women are*– that's part of the original business plan from publishers Harlequin. From a distribution standpoint, that's expensive: a smaller number of books at every sales point (think grocery check-out line). So transport costs are higher for every unit sold.

I'm pretty sure that I've seen George Martin books at the grocery store also, so I think that the High-Fantasy-120k-word people have taken a page out of Harlequin's book. (Narrrr! A funny!)

To make all that work, you'd better be able to sell every unit at Piggly Wiggly. The category romance reader, clearly, wants a paired-down love story. She probably doesn't have the same amount to time to spend on details that a *Song of Ice and Fire* reader has.

Exhibit 1:

A Game of Thrones, George Martin: 720 pages.

The Billionaire Gets His Way, Elizabeth Bevarly: 192 pages.

Our bodice-ripper-reader might not have the extra time to swing by Borders or she may not like to buy books online. She's probably an impulse book-buyer and is influenced a lot by the cover of the book.

I'm just guessing, that's all.

Exhibit 2:

A Game of Thrones, George Martin: 2,691 customer reviews on Amazon.

The Billionaire Gets His Way, Elizabeth Bevarly: 2 customer reviews on Amazon.

So, I'm seeing a middle-aged mother reading about the billionaire, and an unmarried technology worker going for George Martin. These two readers have something in common, because they both want an erotic element in their books. This trend started in the 1970s, but I'll talk about the history tomorrow.

The mom seems to want more nookie than the sci-fi nut. It seems that HBO's *A Game of Thrones* covers both markets. Right after Rango!

Exhibit 3:

Amazon Search results.

Your search ""sex romance" " sex science fiction"" did not match any products.

""sex romance" " ~~sex~~ ~~science~~ fiction"" (See all 18,028 results)

""~~sex~~ romance" " ~~sex~~ science fiction"" (See all 17,984 results)

""sex ~~romance"~~ " ~~sex~~ science fiction"" (See all 100 results)

I believe that the whole page-count thing is really a proxy for how much free time a group of readers has. I wonder if agents ever get discouraged.

Thank you to wolf-howl.com for the picture.

LEAVE A COMMENT

IDEAL READERS

It may seem strange that I write about writing, but rarely post anything (not bloggy) that I've written. That's because I'd like to get my work in print and publishers don't like sloppy seconds.

It's also because I've started to write a novel. I've been working on it for two months and it drains every spare bit of energy that I have. Sometimes it's really, really hard to keep going- there is still so much to do.

What keeps me on track is imagining what people I care about would say if they read the script. The anticipation of seeing enjoyment on their faces- that's gold to me.

There are three people who I write for, but that number seems to be unusual. Here's Ernest Hemingway's take on the subject:

I believe that basically you write for two people; yourself to try to make it absolutely perfect; or if not that then

> *wonderful. Then you write for who you love whether she can read or write or not and whether she is alive or dead.*

And of course, Mr. King's 'ideal reader' is his wife Tabitha, who doesn't spare his feelings.

Tabby does more than just give him a goal to work for; she helps him with pace, editing, rooting out mistakes or inconsistencies. He imagines himself telling a story to her. When she actually comes to read it, he figures out how well he knows her.

My guess is that most writers work this way- if they really care about what they're creating. Writing is about craving attention from someone you love. That's a *needy* thing, but there are worse things than being needed.

LEAVE A COMMENT

UNCOVERING FOSSILS

The Writer's Craft.

I couldn't wait very long to do the next installment of Stephen King's *On Writing*.

King doesn't believe in plot. I'm not being cute here- he doesn't believe in it.

> *I distrust plot for two reasons; first, because our lives are largely plotless, even when you add in all the reasonable precautions and careful planning; and second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible.*

Stephen goes on to explain this a little more: he doesn't like to limit himself by designing a play-by-play map for a book. He does write with rudimentary ideas in his mind about where a story is going. I enjoy writing like that too- probably most people do.

For any readers who listened to Sarah Cone Bryant's book *How to Tell Stories to Children*, this minimalist-plot method may sound familiar. Because no story should ever come out the same way twice, Bryant recommends memorizing a rough check-list of what happens. The Storyteller can throw in his/her creative bits around the core action.

So, when Stephen is storytelling, the plot bubbles up from the tar of his subconscious.

> *Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world. The writer's job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each one out of the ground intact as possible.*

Another way of saying that is: Stephen is knitting a story from the bits of information that he's gleaned from movies, the 'news', other people's fiction, etc.

There's nothing wrong with this *per se*. But what are these bits of information that he's working with? How has Stephen entertained himself these sixty-odd years?

Before King answers that, one more blast from the past. Remember Orwell's *Boys' Weeklies*?

> *Personally, I believe that most people are influenced far more than they would care to admit by novels, serial stories, films and so forth, and that from this point of view the worst books are often the most important, because they are usually the ones that are read earliest in life.*

From King's *On Writing*:

> *The first thing I remember watching on it [his first television] was* Robot Monster*; a film in which a guy dressed in an ape-suit with a goldfish bowl on his head- Ro-Man, he was called- ran around trying to kill the last survivors of a nuclear war. I felt this was art of quite a high nature.*

And…

> *And when I lay in bed at night under my eave, listening to the wind in the trees or the rats in the attic, it was not Debbie Reynolds as Tammy or Sandra Dee as Gidget that I dreamed of, but Yvette Vickers from* Attack of the Giant Leeches *or*

> *Luana Anders from* Dementia 13*. Never mind sweet; never mind uplifting; never mind Snow White and the Seven Goddam Dwarfs. At thirteen I wanted monsters that ate whole cities, radioactive corpses that came out of the ocean and ate surfers, and girls in black bras who looked like trailer trash.*

And…

> *Horror movies, science fiction movies, movies about teenage gangs on the prowl, movies about losers on motorcycles- this was the stuff that turned my dials up to ten.*

A fine mind, poorly educated. These quotes explain a lot to me. Stephen is a product of his media-generation: like Ernie "Chip" Douglas from *The Cable Guy*. That's why King books feel so familiar; why the characters are stereotypical; why there's nothing challenging about his work.

Stephen King's father was not around and his mother had to work full time to support him and his siblings. So we can't assume that she approved of the steady diet of garbage that ran through her son's eyes and ears. But it happened, and the world was gifted Stephen as a result.

Parents everywhere, I have one question: A King, or a Dickens?

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